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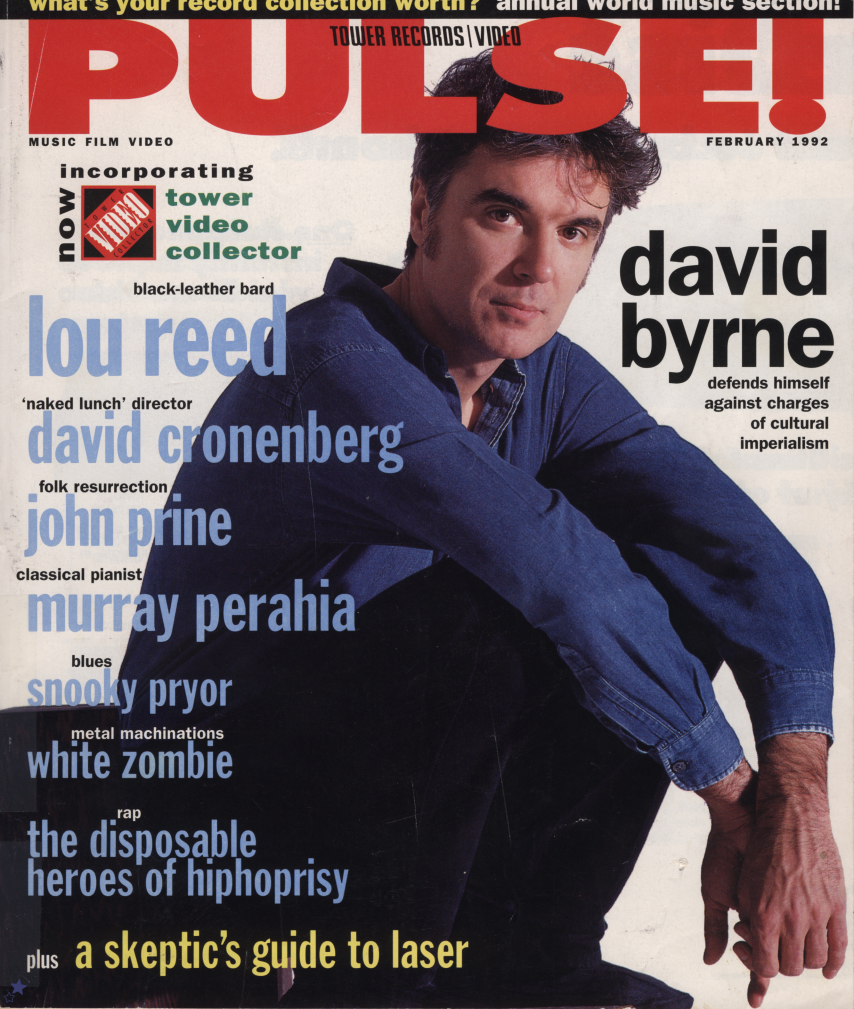
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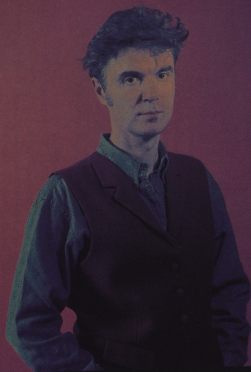
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Quirky white guy

# David Byrne

made his mark leading Talking Heads to popular success. But lately he's been passionate for the sounds of Latin America, once again staking his claim for musical territories outside of the North American mainstream

ART-SCHOOL DILETTANTE OR SERIOUS WORK



Just a half a decade ago, David Byrne was the critics' pet, hailed as the "thinking man's rock star" in the *New York Times Magazine* and "rock's renaissance man" on the cover of *Time*. His quirky-jerky melodies, surreal lyrics, jangly guitar, high-strung vocals, spasmodic stage moves and whimsical wardrobe had propelled Talking Heads from art school in Rhode Island through salad days in new-wave New York and on to international adoration in temples of the avant-garde. No mere superstar, Byrne was acclaimed as a significant artist, serious enough to collaborate with choreographer Twyla Tharp, playwright Beth Henley and librettist Robert Wilson, for whose opera *The Forest* he

By Larry Birnbaum



Photographs by Mim Michelove

composed an orchestral suite. He scored movies by Jonathan Demme and Bernardo Bertolucci, copping an Oscar and a Grammy, and directed his own feature film, *True Stories*.

Reserved, at times awkwardly self-conscious, and weary-faced, Scottish-born Byrne has been praised and

writers know the music and have personal favorites that are different from mine, and they may feel they could have made a better selection." In fact, Byrne sent a letter to the editor—"Uncle I give up," it began—

**"I think my lyrics and the way I sing are pretty white, but musically I don't feel bound to play the music of my grandparents. I don't think you need to have grown up with some music to be touched by it."**

picked on for his white, "Anglo-Saxon" sensibility, though he's embraced funk, African, Brazilian and Caribbean influences in turn. From the stark minimalism of the early Talking Heads, the Afro rhythms and tropical textures grew progressively lush and denser on such albums as *Fear of Music*, *Remain in Light*, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (a Headless session with Brian Eno), *Speaking in Tongues*, *True Stories* and *Naked*. He directed *Ile Aïye*, a documentary on the Afro-Brazilian candomblé religion, and compiled Brazilian and Cuban hits on his own Luaka Bop label. And in 1989 Byrne went solo with *Rei Momo*, backed by some 20 top Latin musicians. But this time the reception was decidedly mixed, and with the Heads on indefinite hold, the sharks began to circle.

"Byrne's album should not even be heard," protested salsa bandleader Eddie Palmieri. "It has nothing to do with authenticity." Willie Colon, who cowrote one song for *Rei Momo* and sang on two, accused himself and fellow collaborators of "willingly giving up their juice to some pale, spastic, soulless hack." Critics who'd never before reviewed a Latin album chimed in, objecting that Byrne's pointedly personal English-language takes on salsa, samba, merengue and cumbia were not idiomatically pure. *QQ* ran an extensive critique by a financial writer who dismissed the mostly Caribbean-styled *Rei Momo* as a Brazilian album and deflated the Heads while lamenting their apparent decline, writing off Byrne as a pretentious pony.

**"Y**ou know, I never came on saying, 'This is the real thing,'" Byrne says of *Rei Momo*. "So there wasn't much I could say to that. I had to just take it and then let it go by." As for Willie Colon: "He's a bad-ass kind of guy, so he's keeping his reputation intact. But in my opinion, the New York salsa scene has been stuck in a rut for a number of years. You go to Cuba or Venezuela, Florida, Colombia—people are creating new sounds and new rhythms. Some people are doing that in New York, but for the most part the scene is stagnant. I don't want to make great claims for my record, but I never made the claim that it was supposed to be authentic. Everybody knows that if you want to buy a Celia Cruz record, you can always go buy something like that. Claiming that something is authentic implies that there's only one way to do something. It's like saying there's only one way to play rock'n'roll, and this guy's not doing it right. When people say that, the music is starting to get frozen."

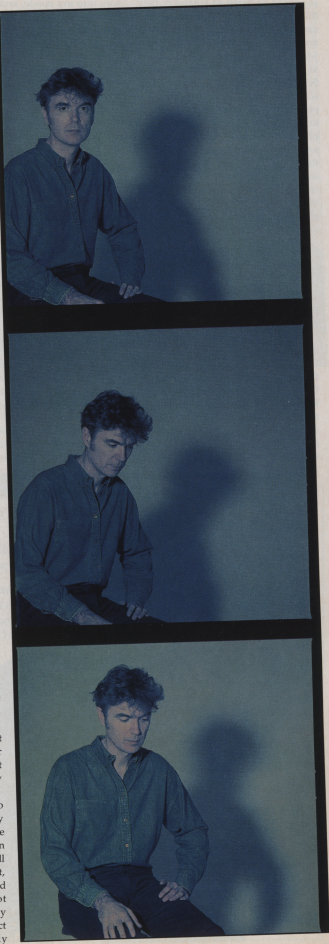
More knowledgeable critics nitpicked the artists and repertoire on Byrne's compilations. "Some of the

after *The New York Times* second-guessed his first Brazilian collection, *Beleza Tropical*. "That was a whole page," he says of the *Times* piece, "and it was so weird, because it was an album that's way outside the U.S. mainstream, and they were treating it like the next release by Michael Jackson or Madonna by giving it such huge coverage. And then to put it down and say once again, 'This is not the good stuff, I'm going to tell you what the good stuff is'—it just struck me as bizarre. A lot of things the guy said I should have picked were instrumental, jazz-tinged records, and that's just not my background. I was bringing it to different audiences.

"It's not like I'm riding on top of the charts, where you'd expect a few arrows and hatchets to be slung my way. So it's kind of strange. Maybe it's the kind of thing where I've been around a while, and people thought I was getting too self-important and needed to be poked a little bit.

"I have felt that in the '80s, America became more insular, and as the economy starts to falter, the pride of the country gets wounded in various ways. There's more boosterism, more disdain for things that are foreign. To accept that some of the greatest music being made is not being made within our borders is to accept another instance where maybe America is not number one. It's a difficult thing to do. And for some people, the music doesn't speak to what their experience has been or what their adolescence has been or what their day-to-day living is about. They might not relate to it.

"And maybe Latin music is too close to home," Byrne continues. "You know, they never liked Iggy Pop in Detroit. People don't get it when it's right in their own backyard, and this music is happening all around you—in Brooklyn, down the street, all over the place. It's in record stores and on the radio and everywhere. I'm not going to ignore it for some imaginary ideological reason. I'm not going to restrict myself musically because I'm only



supposed to listen to whatever they think I'm supposed to listen to. You can't control musicians that way. I think my lyrics and the way I sing are pretty white, but musically I don't feel bound to play the music of my grandparents—Scottish jigs or French folk songs or something like that. I don't think you need to have grown up with some music to be touched by it. The British blues players didn't grow up in Mississippi, and the way they play the blues is not the way guys in Texas and Mississippi and Chicago play the blues, but people took to it. And it was not their music. When people in Britain first started playing [blues], I'm sure they thought it was something distant and exotic.

"So I don't feel that *Rei Momo* was a mistake. It was obviously not one of my most popular albums, but it's got elements of a lot of the music I listen to all the time. I wrote some of the songs—the merengues and the chu-chas and the sambas—with those rhythms in mind, so I was writing to those rhythms. On other songs I left it up to Milton Cardona and the other drummers to figure out what kind of groove would fit the chord changes and the melody. Milton has a pretty broad knowledge of rhythms, and he might have improvised some of them a little bit; I think the mapaye was some kind of hybrid, not a traditional rhythm. So that stuff finds its

way into my music, and I think as I keep working with it in some form, it becomes more a part of what I do and less me doing a version of somebody else's music. I can feel freer about synthesizing things and mixing things up, taking a little bit of this and adding it to that. I can play a little bit freer on a mixture with it."

**A**s far back as *True Stories*, *Rolling Stone's* reviewer had pronounced the Haitian-flavored "Papa Legba" a "total mystery" alongside the Heads' "more sensible and successful" pursuit of "their American musical roots." *Rei Momo* was simply the straw that broke the camel's back—not a departure from Byrne's previous work but a logical extension. One track, "Loco de Amor," featuring Cuban diva Celia Cruz with Ray Baretto's band, was lifted from Byrne's soundtrack to Jonathan Demme's *Something Wild*; the last Talking Heads album, *Naked*, had already skewed the cheeky Dylan takeoff "Mr. Jones" with a salsa chart by trumpeter and *Rei Momo* arranger-to-be Angel Fernandez. By then there had been flirtations with Tex-Mex, Afro-pop, gospel and soul, which Byrne insists he had from the start. "The Europeans," Byrne says, "always compared the early Talking Heads things to, like, Booker T. and the MGs, even on the very first

record. And on our second record we played an Al Green song, which made it pretty clear that we were listening to that stuff. But they picked up that there was some kind of r&b influence in our music, even though the subject might have been white."

His affection for world music runs just as deep. "I heard some of those South African jive guitar records way back around 1978 and got excited," he recounts. "I thought, here's somebody that took a kind of guitar arrangement and turned it on its head. But the first stuff I heard was when I was a kid. You could check records out of the library, and they had all these Nonesuch and Folkways records—songs from the Bahamas and Balinese gamelan music and this and that. So it was kind of a no-risk thing: you could check it out without throwing money away, and if you liked it, you liked it, and if you didn't, you didn't. And there was an atmosphere at the time that encouraged widening your musical horizons, so it wasn't frowned on or thought of as being academic or elitist. It was cool to know about different kinds of music, instead of being just strange. So I think my attitudes about it formed then."

Released on Sire in 1989, *Beleza Tropical* was the first Brazilian pop anthology to draw material from different labels, gathering singer-

composers Milton Nascimento, Gilberto Gil and Jorge Ben, who'd had U.S. exposure before, together with equally talented artists like Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque. Though hardly definitive, it remains the best album of its kind. "Initially I heard the records that were out here or that I could buy in Europe," Byrne explains, "and I heard a kind of synthesis and experimentation. There was something serious or innovative or rebellious being said in what sounded like a real pretty ballad, with a strong sense of melody and an interesting groove. They were always pushing to do something different with their music in ways that I wished popular music was doing here. I felt that things were getting kind of stagnant, and I thought, 'Here's a whole scene that seems vibrant and innovative.' So it really attracted me."

Dodging critical brickbats, Byrne charged ahead with a second Brazilian collection, *O Samba*—the first on Luaka Bop—presenting the Afro-rooted music of Brazil's urban slums, the raw material for the pop poet's sophisticated creations. "It's mostly from Rio and that area," he says. "It's more danceable than the stuff on *Beleza Tropical*, and the arrangements are more straightforward, less consciously innovative, but they're still good. I think a couple weren't big hits, but most of them were pretty

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popular songs."

Then, while finishing *Ile Aye* in Bahia, he stumbled on the truly esoteric sound of forro, an accordion-based folk-pop style from northeastern Brazil. "I heard a lot of that music on the radio,

thing down into every little category, because I'd end up with a dozen different records." Despite its homey rural air, forro sounds suspiciously like the ill-fated lambada, which was concocted using French studio musi-

## "I'd start off buying records with guys holding accordions on the cover or people with Brazilian cowboy hats. That would get you into the ballpark."

but you didn't hear it in the record stores or in the streets, and you didn't hear bands playing it. I realized it was mainly up north, but I got to hear it a little bit. I'd start off buying records with guys holding accordions on the cover or people with Brazilian cowboy hats. That would get you into the ballpark, and you could find your way after that."

Throwing commercial considerations to the winds, he put out the third Brazil Classics compilation, *Forro Etc.* "People have heard the name 'samba,'" he says, "but this is a word you can't even pronounce, so it's a tougher sell. But I thought, well, let's do it. I always cheat, though. The forro compilation has a lot of stuff that's not strictly forro, and not all of the samba one is straightahead samba. But I wasn't about to break the

cians to soup up northeastern Brazilian tunes. "I stayed well clear of it," Byrne demurs, "but as far as I could tell, it was promoted in the northeast part of Brazil as a revival of an older rhythm under a new name. But it had a dirty dance attached to it, so it was the dance that everybody was getting it for. People danced to it in the street in Bahia. At some of the festivals they'd play not the lambada that was brought in from France, but their own versions, which were harder and more pumped up. It wasn't very sensual; it was just dirty, mostly a lot of crotch rubbing."

**H**ow does an outsider select artists and material to anthologize from genres that have grown increasingly marginal on their own home turf?

"I pick them out from boxes of albums," Byrne says. "I'd just listen to tons and tons of records, and then I'd talk to somebody and he'd say, 'I see what you're interested in. You should hear this and this and this.' Sometimes I'd

pay someone who was in Brazil. I'd say, 'I'm short of a certain kind of forro record. Can you get some for me?' And the next person who was coming up from Sao Paulo or wherever would bring a suitcase full, and I'd sift through



# MARK EGAN

Mark Egan's music is a unique blend of folk, rock, and country. His songs are often characterized by their simple, direct lyrics and catchy melodies. Egan's music has been featured in numerous films and television shows, and he has won several awards for his work.

**MARK EGAN**

# STEVE KHAN

Steve Khan is a multi-talented musician who plays guitar, piano, and organ. He has been a member of several bands, including The Allman Brothers Band and The Grateful Dead. Khan's music is known for its intricate guitar work and soulful melodies.

**STEVE KHAN**

Small portrait of a woman, likely a featured artist or collaborator.

Small portrait of a man, likely a featured artist or collaborator.

Small portrait of a man, likely a featured artist or collaborator.

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those. Some of the records I got down there; some of it was on the radio. There's one radio station in Rio that plays samba, pagode and real popular local stuff, and there might be one that plays jazz, but pretty much everything else across the board is regular pop music as we know it—Prince, Madonna, Michael Jackson, and then for a ballad they might throw in a Roberto Carlos tune. Or if it's not Western pop artists that we know, it's Brazilians that sound exactly like somebody up here."

Tom Ze didn't sound like anyone else in the U.S. or Brazil. A cofounder, along with Veloso and Gil, of the tropicalia movement that transformed Brazilian pop in the late '60s, he grew up more radical as his comrades mellowed—adding a typewriter, blender and floor polisher to his orchestral textures—and was well on his way to avant-oblivion when Byrne happened on one of his albums in Rio. "His stuff continued to be eclectic and out there, and so he kind of relegated himself to a fringe existence," says Byrne. "I think eventually some of his deals lapsed, and he was beginning to be forgotten by the Brazilians, although his name was remembered as being connected with a particular period." When Byrne dug Ze's master tapes out of the vaults and issued *The Best of Tom Ze* as volume four of the Brazil Classics, the raves, for once, were unanimous. "It was not, by far, our best-selling record, but it was really well received," says Byrne. "Most of the experimental stuff has a strong basis in rhythm or melody. There's a hook or something that keeps you anchored most of the time and a seductive quality even when it's getting pretty far out. We loved it, and I think it will stand the test of time."

Byrne and his Luaka Bop partner Yale Evelev then turned to Cuba, whose music ruled the pre-Castro Latin scene in the U.S. and elsewhere before being stifled by the Trading With the Enemy Act. "There were a few groups I knew of," he says, "a few I'd seen in Paris or at music festivals in South America. And I'd remember, oh, that was a good band. Beyond that, there was lots that I hadn't heard. But we were lucky. We were approached by these lawyers, Michael Krinsky and David Golove, who handle the Cuban diplomatic mission in the U.S. They said, 'Listen, we know you're interested in Cuban music, so if you ever want to do something, let us know.' And we said, 'Sure. We're ready.' There's a flight to Cuba you can get out of Miami, if it's prearranged and you have permission, but without their help, the paperwork would have been daunting."

The Cuban Classics series opened

with a greatest-hits album by Silvio Rodriguez, a leader of the nueva trova movement that, like Brazilian tropicalia, combines poetry and politics with native folk forms, lilting melodies and a heavy dose of the Beatles. "He's probably just as influenced by Bob Dylan," maintains Byrne. "In the '70s and early '80s he worked with a band, Afro-Cuba, so his stuff became more produced. I put more of that on the album, but there are a few of his earlier, folkier things on there too. But like the first Brazilian compilation, it can put people off because it's so sweet, it doesn't have any guts to it. And like the Brazilians, there's a real integration of the music and the lyrics. Some of his songs are overtly political, but he picks that up from rockers and folkies as well—that that's something you can do. He very much defines with the revolution and the goals it stands for, or stood for. So in his living room there's a big picture of Che on the wall, just like people might have had in '60s campus dorm rooms. And I looked at it and thought, I can't imagine what kind of leader I'd put on the wall. It's such a different situation."

*Cuba Classics 2*, a collection of Cuban hits from the '60s and '70s, was titled *Dancing With the Enemy*. "There was an article about the record in the Cuban paper, *Granma*, and they had to explain the title and it was ironic," says Byrne. "We went there and spent a week working out the arrangements for the tapes and listening to stuff in their archives, because most of the records are out of print and definitely not available here. And then we just drove around the country for a while to get to know the place a little bit better. There were bands playing live pretty much all the time in different towns. We traveled around, and nearly every night we'd catch something. It was amazing. It's like New Orleans, a place where a lot of cultures come together and created this real fertile mix. They had variations they got into, like these Haitian-style rara rhythms from the eastern end of Cuba, where there's a stronger Haitian influence. And then there were some really wacky, unexpected things like the group Los Zafiro—there whole record was sort of a Cuban version of the Coasters."

Although it includes post-revolutionary rhythms like theongo and changui, much of *Dancing With the Enemy* sounds frozen in the '50s, an impression Byrne hopes to correct on a second Cuban compilation. "They had a movement in the '60s that was similar to the boogaloo here," he says, "and then in the '70s Los Van Van and some of the other artists took things in another direction. We hinted at some of that, but really didn't get into it too deeply."



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There's some innovative stuff going on, and we'd like to highlight more of the things that were done during the last decade. The newer stuff sounds like they're experimenting a lot more. There's music where they've taken Santeria rhythms and set them to electric guitars and synthesizers. It's a self-pride thing, where they're reasserting their own culture. Putting those rhythms and that sensibility into pop music is a political statement as well as a musical idea. And then there's some Van Van cuts where the lead instrument is a synthesizer bass, where the textures don't sound typically Afro-Cuban anymore. We even got some new tapes from Cuba a little while ago of heavy metal bands. You hear it and go, 'I just don't believe it,' but there it is."

**B**yrne projects future Luaka Bop albums of Indian and Japanese music, as well as new Tom Ze recording, but the label's latest release, *Americana*, is a collection by a British dream-pop duo called A.R. Kane, best known here for their work with the M/A/R/R/S production crew on the hip-hop classic "Pump Up the Volume." Alex Ayuli is of Nigerian extraction and Rudy Tambala is half Malawian, but their haunting trance-dance mix owes more to Sun Ra and Steve Reich than to Afro-pop. "I guess you could look at it in a way like it's world beat from the English-speaking countries," says Byrne. "They do interesting stuff that spans a pretty wide range, with catchy tunes. But we try to look at music without prejudice, without saying, 'This belongs in this category and this belongs there.' It's just, *I like this, I like that*, and it doesn't matter that they're in different genres. We'd like to throw things together that way, which is going to be a little confusing for people, but that's the way we hear. It's like spinning the ideal radio dial and hearing interesting stuff coming out of lots of stations."

"The North American or British music has been really pervasive. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, James Brown, Michael Jackson, that stuff has gone around the world. Everybody's heard it, and it's common currency, a part of everybody's vocabulary. And now all this stuff is coming back, and people are getting used to hearing highlife guitars or Cuban or Brazilian music in the same way that people in Brazil heard Beatles records. But although a lot of radio stations and TV shows are still pushing the North American stuff, people in other parts of the world don't have as much respect for it as maybe some people would like. They like to take it apart and reassemble it, twist it around and put it back together in their own way. Which is

great. Throw it back at us and we'll barely recognize it. So eventually, elements of their music will become part of our music, I would think."

**F**oreign sounds have certainly become a part of Byrne's music. His new solo album, *Uh-Oh*, uses some of the same musicians who appeared on *Rei Momo*, plus Tom Ze, Meters bassist George Porter, Jr., and old friend Nona Hendryx. Besides tropical rhythms and horn charts, there are traces of folk-rock and Tin Pan Alley and gobs of Heady weirdness. "There's a bit from almost everything I've done," Byrne says. "It touches all bases. I find that now I can accept and integrate stuff from everything I've done. I can accept that, yeah, that's me, that's me, that's me. I can do that, I can sing a song like this, whereas there was a period when I just didn't want to do certain things. I want to tour with a band that worked on this record, and I'll do some of these tunes, some of my previous tunes, some Talking Heads tunes and some other people's songs as well. I just hope it has an easier path than my last record, but who knows? You just go on gut instinct and hope it gets over."

Byrne is more comfortable discussing his music than his lyrics, which on *Uh-Oh* take up such familiar themes as sexual confusion, shopping-mall surrealism and anti-establishment politics. "I don't know what to say about the words," he says. "I looked at them on paper after I'd sung them all, and I thought, you know, it's not poetry, but it works as a song. It's a different kind of thing. A song lyric is something that fits into the meter of the groove that you're putting it to. It says something when you put it to that melody, but when you take it out, it can be a pretty flat, stupid-looking little piece of writing. I try to make anything that's political sort of personal; otherwise it just sounds like a newspaper or magazine article. But I don't think that I feel that much more alienated than anybody else. To me, it just means that you're not totally comfortable with the way things are. And I would say that if anybody's completely comfortable with the way things are, then they're the one that's got a problem."

And Talking Heads? "We've finished up some old tracks," says Byrne, "and they're going on a greatest-hits compilation that'll come out some time [in 1992]. We're still inactive or broken up or whatever you want to call it, but we're still in contact with one another. I don't put nails in the coffin, but we don't have plans to do anything any time in the future."

*Larry Birnbaum is a New York-based freelance writer who specializes in every kind of music, save classical.*

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